Course Design

Developing programs and materials for language learning

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Introduction

1 Instructional planning and English language teaching

At various times during their careers, professionals in the field of language teaching find themselves involved in tasks quite removed from actual classroom instruction. Among these non-teaching assignments are the planning of courses and the writing of materials. Both require specialized background of a kind which is commonly glossed over lightly or benignly ignored in too many university programs in applied linguistics, English language teaching and teacher training. Yet, graduates of such programs are often called upon to fulfill course design tasks without having received the proper training to do so. Throughout these chapters, we have tried to maintain the point of view of designers and writers rather than the one more frequently employed, that of teachers, the objective of this book being to enable teachers to expand their expertise so as to become course designers. We have done this deliberately – and we hope consistently – because we feel that it is a view which has been undervalued and relatively unexplored.

Since the planning of courses and the writing of materials is a sparsely documented area, designers and writers have tended to work on the basis of their best intuitions. Fortunately, people who design language courses are usually thoroughly familiar with what goes on in classrooms. However, designing courses which will be used by other teachers or writing textbooks for a wide and unknown audience is different from planning one's own teaching. Therefore, it is necessary to use a different frame of reference, to acquire new perspectives from which to see the issues.

The very complexity of human language together with the wide variety of circumstances in which it is taught may partly explain why the field of language pedagogy has paid comparatively slight attention to the basics of course designing and materials writing. Instead, it has stressed the activities of single teachers and their students, as evidenced by the long history of methodology directed at this audience alone. Among other reasons, this concentration on the individual pedagogue has tended to keep second and foreign language specialists from paying much attention to the well-developed field of general curriculum construction outside ESL. For its part, the general curriculum field, in the United States

at least, has only been concerned with foreign language teaching (typically of major European languages to American students); English as a second language is such a newcomer in North America that some in the educational system believe the letters 'ESL' stand for one, particular methodology.

2 General curriculum planning

As background information for second and foreign language course designers, a brief review of a few of the outstanding contributors to the general curriculum planning literature is warranted. Taba's outline (1962:12) of the steps which a course designer must work through to develop subject matter courses has become the foundation for many other writers' suggestions. Her list of 'curriculum processes' includes the following:

1. Diagnosis of needs
2. Formulation of objectives
3. Selection of content
4. Organization of content
5. Selection of learning experiences
6. Organization of learning experiences
7. Determination of what to evaluate, and the means to evaluate

Adapted to English language teaching matters, her list, although suggestive, is not sufficiently explicit regarding the area of language content. Nor does it allow for a distinction between broad, national goals for courses in multilingual contexts and narrower course objectives for the teaching of actual language skills and competencies.

Another writer who also has written on general curriculum designs, McNeil (1977:1), offers guidelines for planning which are extremely valuable for identifying the role that a curriculum plays in establishing the intellectual backdrop or policy for instructional plans. He categorizes recent curriculum designs in the United States under four general headings based on their educational-cultural orientations: humanistic, social-reconstructionist, technological, and academic subject matter. Any one of these orientations could serve as the basis for a curriculum for a language program. However, since McNeil's model is not specifically concerned with language programs, what is lacking is some mechanism for including a theoretical view toward language and language learning.

3 The aim of the book

The chief purpose of this book is to present an overview of the course designer's task, beginning with its most fundamental aspect, societal

needs assessment, then working through curriculum and syllabus construction, finally coming to the stage of materials preparation. In relation to materials, a few selected aspects of the craft of writing are illustrated. In following this outline, we have drawn on the steps proposed by Taba, applying her suggestions in the context of second and foreign language teaching. To formulate this comprehensive view of designing for language learning, we have established certain basic definitions of key terms: 'curriculum', 'syllabus', 'goals', 'objectives', and 'needs'.

The terms 'curriculum' and 'program' are used interchangeably in this book to describe the broadest contexts in which planning for language instruction takes place, either on the national level or for a community's schools. A 'syllabus', on the other hand, is a more circumscribed document, usually one which has been prepared for a particular group of learners. In some places, the terms syllabus and course outline mean the same thing, although recently the term syllabus has taken on a special meaning concerning the specification of language content alone.

Although the terms 'goals', 'objectives' and 'needs' are apt to be used without regard for the important distinctions among them, a model for designing language programs should set them apart. Goals address more general, societal, community, or institutional concerns. In developing a language curriculum, issues concerning language planning and policy must be taken into account since it is the society or broader community which the program serves that fundamentally determines the goals to be manifested in the course. In an ideal situation, thus, goals are determined by carefully examining information about the patterns of language use within the various domains of the society, as well as by studying group and individual attitudes toward English and toward all other languages which are used in the setting. We have also used the term 'societal needs assessment' in relation to determining program goals.

A curriculum which is not in line with the broader community's concepts of language education, certainly one which does not accommodate the immediate audience's expectations – those of teachers and learners – may just gather dust on a shelf. Such could be the fate of a document which reflected the latest discussions of professionals in language teaching/learning circles yet which did not include sufficient explanations for local teachers who were asked to use it. In many ways, curriculum designers must constantly juggle and balance the disparate aspirations, opinions, and beliefs of all of those groups that look to the document they produce for guidance and inspiration.

Objectives, in turn, are specific outcomes or products of courses which are outlined in a syllabus. Objectives guide teachers; they also help learners understand where the course is going and why. Objectives can be expressed in terms of proficiency scores, or as performance objectives such as language skill attainments: a reading rate of so many words

per minute with X% comprehension, or the ability to write a five-paragraph composition with acceptable sentence and paragraph sense. Setting objectives in the course plans makes it possible to carry out the necessary evaluation measures. It also makes it possible to specify the various levels of instruction within a program. Course designers ideally make use of information from all interested sources when they write objectives: learners in previous courses, teachers who are ESOL specialists, teachers in other subject areas – all those in the institutional setting who share an interest in the program.

Needs, on the other hand, are associated with individual learners. Since they change and shift during the period of a course, needs are best addressed at the level of classroom instruction, where a teacher can select appropriate techniques and materials to accommodate individuals. From the course designers' point of view, however, the crucial factors are those that must be determined before the learners arrive. Since a curriculum and a syllabus are documents which are produced to guide teachers and learners, they must be in place and ready to be used before learners and teachers meet together on the first day of the program.

4 Practical applications

An important part of each chapter in *Course Design* is called *'Practical Applications'*. These sections have been included to involve readers more personally in the topics presented, giving them an opportunity to consider the issues through their own experience and background. Although the Practical Applications sections are intended to augment university courses and workshop sessions, individual readers will find that themes developed in each chapter are carried into the Practical Applications section in more concrete form.

References

McNeil, J. D. 1977. *Curriculum: a comprehensive introduction.* Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

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